

Incorporated October 20, 1988

VOLUME 16, NUMBER 2

# LODI HISTORIAN

SUMMER 2005

## THE HAYSTACK MURDER ALEXANDER A. KELS

by Ralph Lea & Janice Roth

Alexander Kels was the founder and proprietor of the Pacific Meat Market at 200 North Sacramento Street as well as the Tokay Meat Market at 25 South School Street. He was born near Cologne, Germany on October 3, 1884. A year later his parents, Peter and Charlotta Kels, moved to Platte County, Nebraska with their eight children. Alex was next to the youngest.

The family moved to Fresno, California in 1895 where Alex attended public schools in the county of Fresno. After finishing grammar school he worked in the butcher shop of Mr. Bracker learning the butcher's trade. Alex married 16 year old Ruby Felch on October 6, 1904.

Two years later they moved to Lodi and Alex entered the employ of

J. J. Guggolz and Mr. Meehle as a cutter and butcher. The following year Kels purchased the interest of Guggolz and the business continued under the firm name of Meehle and Kels Pacific Market. Upon the death of Meehle, Kels purchased the remaining interest in the business from the widow Meehle.

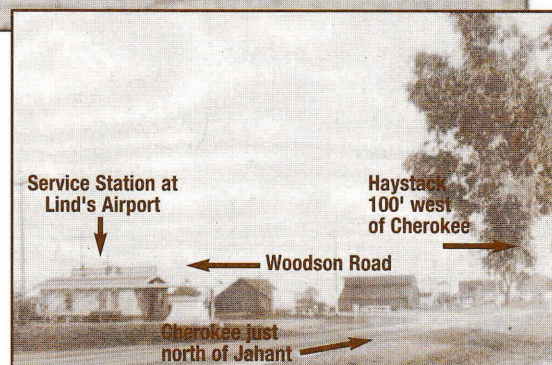


▲ Alex Kels; the remains of his Studebaker automobile near a haystack.  
1923 Record Newspaper photos

As a very young boy, Dick Wagers was shown the site of the haystack by his father. It was located 100' west of Cherokee Lane and north of Jahant Road.



▲ Kingdon Ranch, where the murder is believed to have taken place.  
1923 Record Newspaper photo







◀ In 1908 Alex Kels started driving for C. R. Guggolz and J. C. Keller.

Christmas at the Washington Market. Alex Kels worked for Charlie Guggolz and George Reasoner, later becoming a partner. The second man is Alfred Lincoln (Linc), and on the right Willie (Bill) Guggolz.



During 1917, Kels built a 50' x 125' modern brick building on his lot at the corner of Sacramento and Locust Streets. He later added two cold storage rooms for hanging meat, a modern sales room, tile floors, enamel walls and the most modern fixtures obtainable.

In 1923, Kels established the Tokay Market at 25 South School Street which also had a cold storage plant. Kels was conducting both a retail and wholesale business. His abattoir (slaughterhouse) was north-east of town next to the Mokelumne River. Alex owned 50 acres of vineyard, 160 acres on Telegraph Road and leased a thousand acres more to raise cattle.

Alex Kels' first wife, also known as Ruby Pearson, ran away with a miner named Hicks, who was entombed in the Rawhide mine and was kept alive for days by being fed through a pipe. Kels secured a divorce from Ruby and married Annie T. Handlin, a native of San Jose. They had one daughter, Mary Laverne.

Alex was a member of several

fraternal organizations including the Woodman of the World, the Foresters of America, the Modern Woodmen, the Fraternal Order of Eagles, No. 848, the Knights of Columbus and the Lodi Merchants Association. George Tinkham, in his History of San Joaquin County says, "he is a dependable citizen in every sense of the word and can be counted upon to do his share toward the upbuilding of his locality."

In early September the people of

Lodi, Galt and throughout the county were discussing the spectacular aftermath of a sensational murder. The local newspapers reported that the charred body of Alex Kels was found in his burned car north of Lodi on Wednesday night September 12, 1923. He was a prominent and well liked wealthy Lodi butcher.

Victor Kadiels, a farmer was attracted by a blazing haystack on the William Lange Ranch less than half a mile away shortly before 9 o'clock.





1907; A carnival parade on Sacramento Street. Note the Washington Market, 19 South Sacramento Street, Charles Guggolz, proprietor. ▲

Daniels rushed to the scene and was horrified to see a man seated in the back seat of an automobile next to a burning hay pile.

Another nearby farmer, B. B. Saunders arrived at the scene. He and Daniels endeavored to pull the car away from the fire. Other people came but nothing could be done. The haystack and Studebaker went up in flame.

The Peter Joens Family of Victor was sitting in their backyard near the Mokelumne River. Just after dark they observed a large fire in the north sky. Seventy-two years later one of the Joens daughters remembered that event and related what a handsome man Alex Kels had been by describing the smoothness of the skin on his face. This was later confirmed by myself when as editor of the Lodi

Historian, I met Janis Gay, granddaughter of Alex Kels, who had just learned about the life and death of her grandfather. Her mother had never related the facts to her. The ironic thing was that

Janis had the same smooth skin that her grandfather was noted to have. Coroner Oscar Pope and Sheriff W. H. Riecks were notified but when they arrived the fire was almost extinguished and nothing remained but the charred remains of a human body and the metal framework of a car.

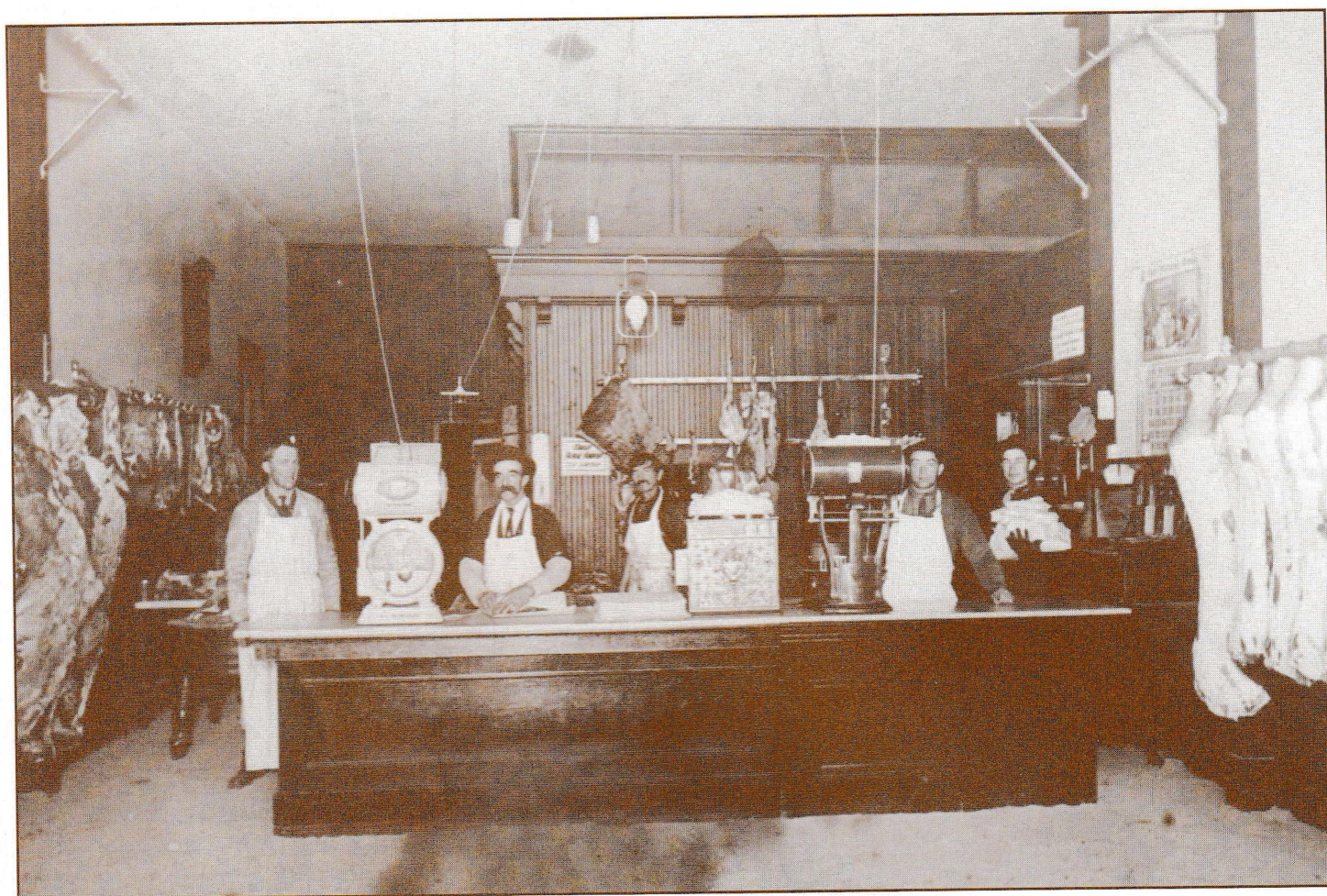
Two days after the fire, an autopsy was performed by Drs. J. E. Nelson and Hugh J. Bolinger. They were unable to determine whether or not the skull was fractured, so badly was it burned. No bullet wounds were found in the body. The coroner's office had the name of Kels' dentist but chances of a positive identification by this means were considered slight, as the teeth were practically consumed in the fire and none were left in the head. Practically all that was determined was that the body was that of a man.

The murder of Alexander Kels became a baffling mystery. With no real clues, talk of mysterious enemies



▲ Bill Comartin drove for the Pacific Market, 119 N. Sacramento Street in 1913.





▲ 1913; The Pacific Market located at 119 N. Sacramento Street, Lodi. Left to right: Alex Kels, Ralph Emerson, Alfred Lincoln (Linc) Granados, Ed Seibel, and Bill Comartin.

or auto bandits committing the crime were rampant.

The funeral for Alex A. Kels, murder victim, was held on September 16, 1923. The body was taken from the parlors of the O.H. Wells Funeral Home to St. Anne's Catholic Church where a Funeral Mass was said by Father Maher. It was one of the largest funerals in North San Joaquin County with 3,000 attending, including representatives from a number of fraternal orders. Two Eagles, two Knights of Columbus, two Red Men and two Businessmen were Pallbearers. The employees of the dead man were honorary pall bearers.

A reward of \$1000 was offered by the Kels family for the apprehension of the murderer of Alex and an arrest was expected at any time.

The whole picture changed on September 29th when the San Joaquin County officials reported doubt in the identification of the charred body previously identified as Alex Kels. Sheriff W. H. Rieks and his deputies reported to the newspaper the movements of Alex Kels Between 8-9 a.m. on September 12, 1923, Alex Kels visited the public employment agency at Lodi and employed a man between 50-60 years of age to feed stock on the Kels' Ranch. Levi Atwood, owner of the building where the employment office was located, overheard Kels offer the man \$2.50 a day and board to feed the stock. The man accepted and went away with Kels in his auto.

At 10 o'clock of the same morning Alex was seen going to the deserted ranch at Kingdon in the company

of a woman. At 11 o'clock he went into Lodi and released one of the men in his butcher shop. Around noon Kels had lunch at the Star Restaurant on Sacramento Street, then went home and changed his clothes. Around 4 o'clock he was seen returning to the ranch at Kingdon with a strange man in his automobile and leaving the place alone a half hour later.

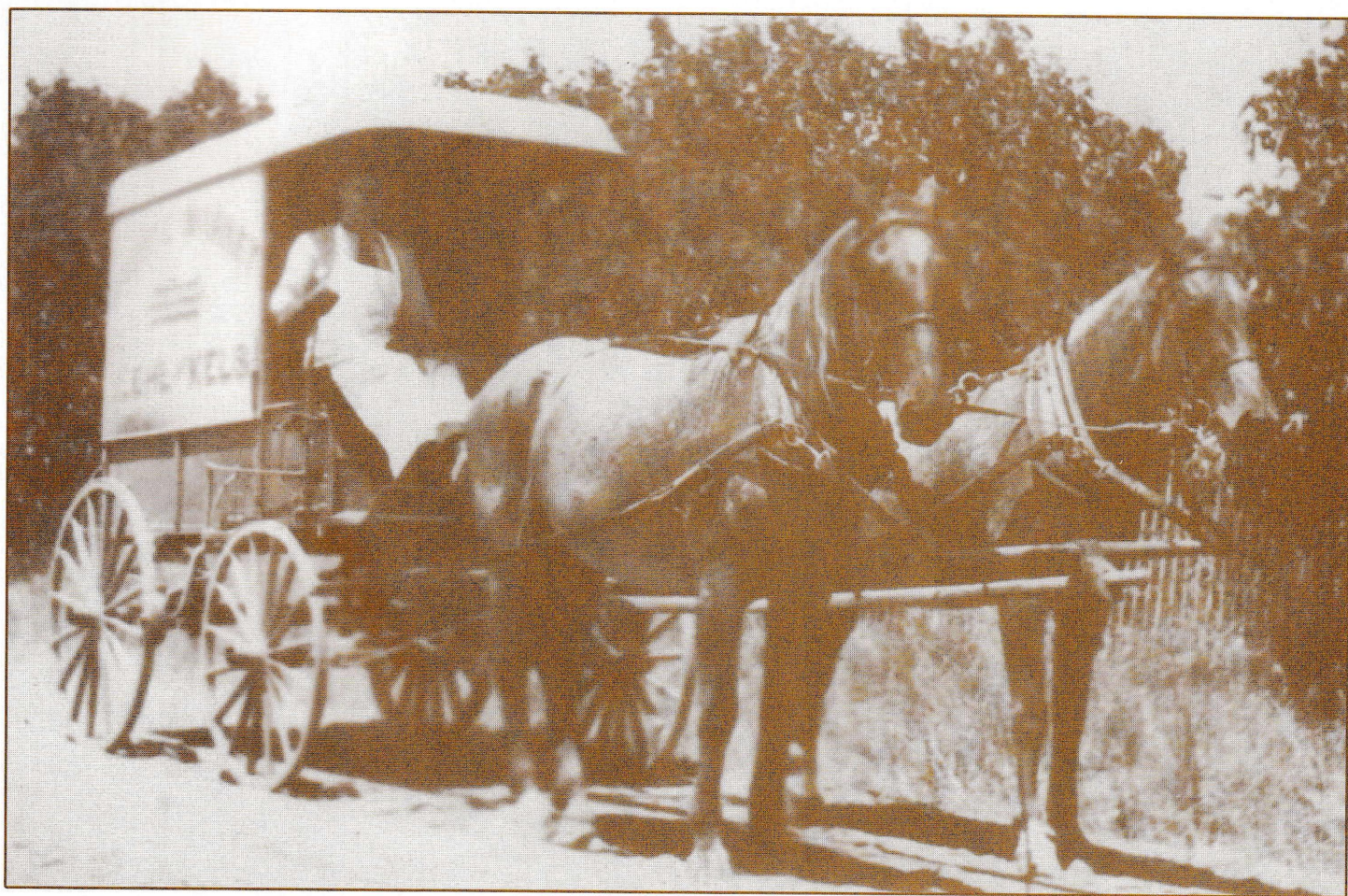
Kels was seen alive about 4:20 p.m. by P. W. Lehman, driver for the Fuller Lumber Company of Lodi, who passed Alex two miles north of Lodi on Cherokee Lane. Lehman was bound toward Lodi and states that Kels, going north, blew his horn and waved in recognition. He thought that there were two or three men in the car.

Kels went east and at 5 o'clock entered the town of Lockeford from





1915; Bill Comartin behind the counter at Kels Meat Company, 119 N. Sacramento Street, Lodi. ▲



1914; Bill Comartin was the driver for the Pacific Market, Meehl & Kels. ▲





▲ 1914; Bill Comartin working for Pacific Market, owned by Frank Meehl and Alex Kels. Note the dog standing by for scraps.

the south. He circled the block in an aimless suspicious manner as if killing time, then went north toward Galt where he purchased sardines and crackers about 6 o'clock although he was only twenty minutes away from his home in Lodi. At 6:45 p.m. Matt Rodacker, a Lodi carpenter, saw Kels alone near Galt driving south. At 7:30 p.m. he was reported driving from Lodi going west to east in the direction of the haystack where the body, at first supposed to be that of Kels, was burned.

The fact that overall buttons were found in the ashes aroused suspicions as Kels never wore overalls. Measurements of the spine showed the torso to be that of a smaller man. On Sunday, Sept 30th Sheriff Riecks reported the Alex Kels was sighted in Reno. After a day or two Tom L.

Bawden, former Lodi embalmer who had dealings with Kels and could not have been mistaken, identified Kels who deliberately tried to avoid him when their glances met.

Alex Kels boarded a west bound train at Reno when another Lodi

man, George Williams greeted Kels but Alex turned and rushed away. When Kels was later arrested he told that he arrived in Reno on Tuesday Sept. 25th at 4 o'clock in the morning and left there about 8 o'clock the same evening. From there he bought a ticket to Ukiah, California. He next went to Willits and then on to Eureka arriving there Sunday, September 30th. He registered at the Vance Hotel under the name of Kronan and later purchased a 22 caliber rifle.

The Eureka police arrested a man who asserted that he was Alex A. Kels, missing Lodi butcher, Monday night October 1st in a box car with the muzzle of a rifle in his mouth. He was trying to pull the trigger with his toes.

The arrest was due to the fact that someone saw Kels carrying a rifle and thought he might try to hold him up and informed the police. At first Kels denied any part in the crime. He had \$99 on his person. The police were finally able to identify Kels because he had a stiff index finger and a deformed toe. Alex Smith of Lodi appeared on the scene and verified Kels' identity. Two days after the capture of Kels in Eureka he headed to Stockton. Kels was placed on the ferry boat, The Oakland Mole. Constable L.J. Hansen drove Alex Kels by automobile to the Stockton County Jail. He slipped into a side door at 11:45 p.m. avoiding a crowd.

Sheriff W. Riecks questioned Kels



▲ Alex Kels' new butcher shop, Bill Comartin on left.



in Eureka before returning him asking many questions and getting some answers. Kels admitted that he hired the new man and drove him to the Kingdon Ranch. He shot him twice through the head with a .32 automatic hand gun, the man groaned and he hit him with the iron bar. He put him back into his machine (car) and drove around for several hours.

He drove the body to the haystack at 8 p.m. with his lights on and set a candle in the machine. He put hay down around the candle that would burn later. He lit the candle and started out for Sacramento along the railroad tracks. As he crossed Dry Creek and saw the haystack burning. Kels was in San Diego when he read of the crime.

Alex Kels made a full confession after worrying over his wife. He murdered Ed "Mac" McServey, substituted the body for his own and fled the

state in an effort to collect an insurance policy of \$100,000 for his wife. He intended to desert her and flee to Mexico. He was en route there when he was recognized in Reno, ended up in Eureka and was about to commit suicide when arrested.

Kels in his cell at the county jail refused to engage counsel. His former business attorney G. F. McNoble was willing but Kels declined. He was however exceedingly anxious to have time to settle his business affairs such as conveying title of his property to his wife.

After being arrested Kels told of purchasing a ticket to San Francisco and said that later he wandered into Mexico and then Arizona, Southern California, Texas, Colorado, Nevada and elsewhere not being able to settle down because of lack of work or being recognized.

The coroners jury met on October 7, 1923 and named Kels as

the murderer of an unknown man. Assistant District Attorney Marion G. Woodward stated that the only chance for Kels to live would be for him to be declared insane.

The jury was composed of ten men, mostly Lodi citizens, Sam Zimmerman, Charles Ferdun, Charles Ferguson, H. N. Madison, Alex Solomon, James Pickering, Dan W. Bird, William Meeske, Walter Minehan and Linden Levitt.

Monday at 10:00 a.m. Alex A. Kels appeared before Judges D. M. Young and G.F. Buck of the Stockton Superior Court. He pled guilty to the charge against him. Kels was sentenced by Judge Young to be hung at Folsom prison on January 4, 1924. The prisoner had many visitors at his cell in Stockton including Rev. Father Maher, workers from the meat shops, cattlemen, and his sister Mrs. E. C. Staples who visited daily. On October



25 S. School Street in Lodi; Tokay Meat Market inside the Tokay Grocery Company. Alex Kels was in charge in 1923. Photo taken in 1941. ▲



19, 1923, A.A. Kels was moved to Folsom Prison.

Mrs. Kels was not told of the status of her husband because of her health and pregnancy.

She had a son born on October 27th and named him John Alexander. On November 10, 1923 she was informed of the fact that her husband was alive and had committed a major crime. Four days later Annie visited her husband at Folsom and the court dissolved the Kels Meat Company.

Warden J. J. Smith of Folsom Prison insisted that the court order tests of the prisoner, to mount a possible defense of insanity. Governor F. W. Richardson agreed, and on December 21st three samples of spinal fluid were taken. All were reported negative.

Petitions asking that Kels sentence be commuted to life imprisonment were started in Lodi and rapidly signed by 1200 citizens. The governor refused to interfere and at

10:06 a.m. the confessed slayer of an aged wandering worker near Lodi paid the penalty. There was a smile on his face when the trap door was sprung on the haystack murderer.

When Father Edward Maher of St. Anne's in Lodi informed Henry C. Boniface, Sexton of St. Joaquim's Cemetery in Lockeford, that Kels' body would be buried alongside that of the man he murdered the sexton strenuously objected. The grave was then moved a hundred eighty feet

to the plot of Kels' father-in-law, Michael Handlin.

On January 5th at 9 a.m. a private funeral was held. It was a cold, damp, fog-dripping morning ending at the grave site with a handful of witnesses including wife Annie, 9 year old daughter La Verne, his sisters and brother William.

This ends the sad story of a Lodi businessman gone bad. A check for \$10,000 from the insurance company was presented to Annie T. Kels, a small compensation for her grief.

#### REFERENCES & CREDITS

Stockton Record, Sept. 1923 - Feb. 1924

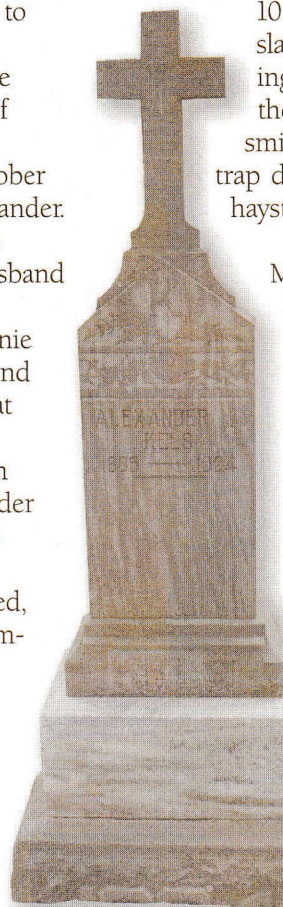
Interview with Al Benoni Granados, son of "Linc" Granados and employee of Kels

Interview with A. Kels' granddaughter, Janis Gay

Interview with Dick Wagers

Pictures courtesy of Wm. J. Comartin & Ralph Lea

- ◀ Alexander Kels, buried 180 feet south of his victim in his father-in-law's plot, (Handlin), in the Catholic Cemetery east of Harmony Grove, a
- ▼ mile west of Lockeford. Below: His beloved wife, Annie.



PUBLISHED WITH A  
GRANT FROM THE LODI  
ARTS COMMISSION

#### THE LODI HISTORIAN

is a quarterly publication of the Lodi Historical Society  
P.O. Box 264, Lodi, CA 95241-0264

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\*Lucy Reller ..... Assistant Editor

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▲ Sak's Store, 2005. Nancy Schmer and Ralph Lea standing at 200 N. Sacramento Street today